Recommendations on Maastricht's Integration Policies

Policy Recommendations Based on Field Research

*By **RPM Academy***

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*In collaboration with the **Municipality of Maastricht***

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Abstract

This report presents a set of recommendations developed by the RPM Academy, a research and advocacy team within Refugee Project Maastricht (RPM), in collaboration with the Municipality of Maastricht. Drawing on qualitative interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, a community survey, and a review of key municipal policy documents, the *Beleidskader Nieuwe Stadsgezichten* (2023) and the *Uitvoeringsprogramma Taal en Participatie* (2024), the report identifies structural and practical barriers faced by newcomers in accessing language education, employment, childcare, and civic participation. Findings highlight mismatches between policy expectations and lived realities, including challenges specific to women, low-literate individuals, and asylum seekers still in legal limbo. In response, the report offers actionable, locally grounded recommendations aimed at making Maastricht's integration policies more inclusive, person-centred, and effective. This work reflects RPM's commitment to amplifying refugee voices and supporting evidence-based local policymaking through bottom-up collaboration.

Background

Refugee Project Maastricht (RPM), in collaboration with the Municipality of Maastricht, conducted a review, through its RPM Academy team, of two key policy documents: the *Beleidskader Nieuwe Stadsgezichten* (2023) and the *Uitvoeringsprogramma Taal en Participatie* (2024). This report presents their findings and recommendations.

About RPM

Refugee Project Maastricht is a youth-led initiative founded in 2015 under the umbrella of the student chaplaincy, The InnBetween. With support from the Municipality of Maastricht, Maastricht University, and various funds, RPM brings together refugees, students, and residents through weekly community-building activities in the heart of the city. Its mission is to help all people, regardless of background, feel at home in Maastricht. Central to RPM's philosophy is the idea of shared ownership: refugees and young people co-design and lead activities, fostering equality, mutual learning, and social cohesion.

Research Team

This report was developed by the RPM Academy, the research and advocacy wing of Refugee Project Maastricht, in close collaboration with the Municipality of Maastricht and supported by academic and policy partners. The team brought together professionals, students, and community organizers dedicated to refugee-centered, evidence-based local policy development.

Team Members:

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Methodology

The analysis drew on desk research, comparative policy reviews, responses to a tailored questionnaire (attached as Appendix), and 25 in-person structured qualitative interviews with asylum seekers and refugees living in Maastricht (referred to as *interviews* in the analysis). In addition, 14 individuals responded to a Google Forms questionnaire, with their input presented as *survey findings* throughout the report. The participants represented over 10 nationalities and ranged in age from 18 to 62 years old, including both women and men. While the main focus was on access to the local labour market and language education, the interviews also raised a broader range of issues. As a result, the document includes a wider set of recommendations to support more effective and inclusive local integration policies.

Introduction

The recommendations below are based on various sources, including desk research and interviews with asylum seekers and status holders. Given that the Beleidskader and Uitvoeringsprogramma are very comprehensive and have only recently been adopted, the authors recognise that several of their concrete measures are still in the early stages of implementation. As such, their full impact may only become visible in the coming years. At the same time, the suggestions presented here are intended as early feedback and as a complement to the existing plans. Their consideration can further strengthen the ambitions of the Municipality of Maastricht to become the inclusive city outlined in the *Stadsvisie 2024*.

A key observation from asylum seekers is that they often feel treated as a single, homogeneous group, despite significant differences in background, education, work experience, skills, family situation, and individual goals. Many expressed frustration at being approached in a uniform way, without recognition of these differences. This concern is reflected in the recommendations, which call for a more person-centred approach that allows for tailored support based on key characteristics such as education level, family context, and individual aspirations.

A related theme is a perceived lack of meaningful participation in shaping local policy. Refugees should not only be consulted - they should also see how input leads to real change. Therefore, alongside the recommendations below, we propose that the Municipality actively involve refugees. This could include structured feedback loops and co-creation processes - for example, by establishing a municipal refugee advisory board or inviting successfully integrated refugees to support case workers in mentoring newly arrived individuals. Where possible, status holders could even be hired as case workers themselves.

While not directly within the Municipality's control, many asylum seekers highlighted the legal limbo they face as a structural barrier to integration. Interviews with those still in the asylum or Dublin procedures reveal the emotional toll of prolonged uncertainty. Without clarity, many remain isolated in reception centres, unable to plan for the future or participate meaningfully. One participant described their situation as "eating and sleeping like animals," while another hesitated to enroll in a course "for nothing" due to the risk of deportation. Khosravi (2010) refers to this condition as *liminal legality*—a grey zone in which individuals are neither fully inside nor outside the system. The result is anxiety, stagnation, and lost years.

Alongside legal uncertainty, many asylum seekers also experience long periods without access to meaningful activities, which further delays integration and negatively impacts mental wellbeing. Despite their willingness to contribute, many remain unaware of available opportunities. To address this, the recommendations below propose enabling early participation through volunteering, informal learning, and community engagement, supported by clear communication, low-threshold access, and cooperation with NGOs and AZCs to reduce isolation. This also forms the basis of our recommendation to ensure that basic orientation, language learning, and community access begin as early as possible, regardless of an individual's procedure status. Early inclusion fosters dignity and builds capacity.

Recommendations

1. Provide Dutch classes early in the process

Many asylum seekers are motivated to learn Dutch, yet face long delays**,** poor communication, or courses that don't match their level, skills, or needs. This hinders integration and negatively affects motivation. As laid out in Chapter 3, Action 1 of the implementation plan (*Uitvoeringsprogramma Taal en Participatie)*, 80% of asylum status holders in the Maastricht AZC begin the voluntary pre-integration programme (115 hours over 14 weeks). Many drop out before completion. The municipality aims to actively promote completion, but those who do finish often face long waits to continue at VISTA College due to municipal waiting lists.

1.1 Research findings

- **Interview 23:** "In Nijmegen, Radboud University has short courses just for refugees, with a certificate and Dutch classes included. A lot of people were lucky to join."
- **Key Findings**: The majority of asylum seekers still in the procedure said they genuinely want to learn Dutch properly, but have little to no access to formal opportunities. Many said they would integrate much more easily if they didn't have to rely solely on volunteering classes to practice the language. Almost all use self-study tools like Duolingo, schoolbooks, and YouTube in the absence of structured classes. Interview findings show mixed experiences: some asylum seekers lack access to COA classes, others find the pace too slow or the timing unsuitable due to other obligations, and prefer self-study. Residents at Marienwaard consistently attend volunteer-led classes and find them helpful, unlike those at the larger AZC on Franciscus Romanusweg.

1.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 5 recommendations.

Dutch language learning should begin from day one [#1], regardless of legal status. Maastricht could draw on best practices from other cities, like Nijmegen, that offer short courses, university-led language options, and early access without waiting for permit approval. Alongside formal classes, **informal options should be expanded**, **including adding additional conversation groups, volunteer-led sessions, and language cafés [#2]**. **Offer different learning tracks [#3]**: fast-paced courses for the highly educated, foundational options for beginners, and flexible formats (evenings, weekends, hybrid). Many refugees are already trying to learn on their own; what they need is access, structure, and support.

To reduce confusion, **a central online overview of all available Dutch classes in Maastricht should be created and regularly updated [#4].** When language class access is delayed, participation is delayed, and that's a missed opportunity. The municipality could collaborate with Vista College, Maastricht University, Hogeschool Zuyd and other relevant local volunteer

organizations to **expand access by offering classes, facilities, and encouraging native Dutch speakers to contribute through community-based teaching [#5].**

2. More Flexible Scheduling of Language Courses

Most integration language courses in Maastricht take place during fixed daytime hours, making it difficult for status holders with jobs, caregiving duties, or volunteer commitments to attend. As the implementation plan notes, many participants struggle to combine classes with participation because "*lessons are given during the day,*" and frequent schedule changes further disrupt planning. This rigidity undermines the dual-track goal of learning and participating simultaneously and can indirectly exclude those trying to work, often men or single parents, forcing them to choose between income and integration.

Although the municipality recognizes the issue and is exploring alternative options, such as evening classes with VISTA College, flexible formats are still lacking. This creates unequal access to integration for those with daytime responsibilities. As the OECD (2023) emphasizes, adult education must offer flexible formats to avoid penalizing those who need it most. In Maastricht, that gap remains.

2.1 Research findings

- **Key Findings**: Some participants explained they had to **quit their job** to attend Dutch classes.
- **Survey Findings**: Several respondents suggested adding **evening and weekend lessons**, as current times clashed with work.

2.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 2 recommendations.

Expand flexible learning schedules for integration courses [#6]. This means expanding evening class offerings, weekend sessions, and possibly online/hybrid learning options to accommodate different availability. The municipality could work with VISTA College and other partners to pilot evening language classes (as the implementation plan suggests) and scale them up according to demand. **Implement blended learning schedules that are work-compatible [#7]**. Another approach is to allow participants to **temporarily reduce class hours when starting a job, and provide complementary *self-study resources or tutoring*** to keep up with language learning until they can resume classes, rather than forcing them to drop out entirely.

By making integration learning more work-compatible, Maastricht can prevent the unintended exclusion of those who are motivated to work or volunteer. This flexibility will also attract greater participation from women who juggle household/caretaker duties. In sum, adapting to learners'

schedules is key to an inclusive integration system; it avoids indirectly privileging those without work/family obligations: integration efforts and employment should reinforce each other, not compete.

3. Address Gendered Dependency Questions and Increase Women-Focused Support

As noted in Chapter 5 – Action Line 2 of the implementation plan (Uitvoeringsprogramma taal en participatie in de Wet Inburgering 2021, 2024), there is a clear need to pay extra attention to female integrationists, particularly those arriving as dependents. Female refugees in Maastricht often face extra integration barriers due to their dependent status and traditional gender roles. Many rely on their spouses for access to Dutch society, which limits their independence and leads to lower participation in language courses, work, and social life. Maastricht's policy framework indeed acknowledges this gender gap and proposes targeted support, such as women-only introduction programs, empowerment training, and female key figures, but could be further strengthened.

3.1 Research findings

- **Key Findings:** Although the interviewed women in the AZCs in Maastricht showed higher motivation to integrate than the male interviewees, they still face unique barriers such as caretaker responsibilities, dependency on partners, and limited mobility.
- **Survey Findings**: Female respondents reported lower participation and more isolation than male peers.

3.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 4 recommendations.

Develop a female-focused integration support track to empower refugee and migrant women [#8]. Concretely, Maastricht could put more emphasis on implementing the ideas mentioned in its policy. For instance, create an **"Introduction to Maastricht for Women" programme**, a weekly group where newcomer women (especially those not in paid work) can gather, learn in an accessible way, and build a network. This could combine language practice with practical information about living in the Netherlands and raising a family, and be led by female coaches or "key women" (successful women with or without a refugee background who act as role models). Such women-only settings have proven effective in other cities to boost confidence and participation.

Offer an empowerment training series, covering topics like Dutch women's rights (important for those from countries with high gender inequality), finding work as a woman in the Netherlands, and balancing family and integration [#9]. The City can partner with NGOs to run these programs. Additionally, we suggest appointing female key workers or

counselors specifically to track the progress of women integrators, especially those in dependent positions. These counselors can reach out if a woman isn't attending classes, to find out if extra support or intervention is needed (for example, mediating with the family, or providing childcare).

Spousal awareness is key: **involve the husbands/partners by making it clear that the integration of their wives is equally important and expected [#10]**. Perhaps during the intake or participation declaration, stress that each family member integrates and highlights the success stories of dual-income refugee families. Legally, the municipality should remember that equal treatment laws (and EU Directive 2000/43/EC's ethos) require providing equitable opportunities, which sometimes means giving *extra support to disadvantaged groups* (affirmative measures are allowed).

Investing in refugee women's integration has high returns: once given the opportunity, women often show strong progress, and their empowerment benefits their children and community. Finally, **draw inspiration from Scandinavian integration programmes that explicitly target gender gaps [#11].** For instance, Sweden and Norway offer combined language-and-work programmes with childcare for mothers, which results in a higher employment rate among refugee women.

4. Enhance Childcare as a Gatekeeper to Integration

Lack of childcare has become a gatekeeper issue preventing many refugee parents, particularly mothers, from attending mandatory language classes, employment and participatory activities. The municipal implementation plan already acknowledges that *"the lack of childcare creates obstacles for these parents to comply with the civic integration obligation"*. Under the new system, municipalities are **not obliged** to organize childcare, and currently no structural solution exists: parents must rely on childcare allowances and their own arrangements. Even when subsidies are available, long **waiting lists** for daycare mean parents cannot actually secure a spot. **Childcare access is a prerequisite for integration** – if parents do not have free time to attend classes, they cannot fulfill their integration duties. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the schedule of language classes at Vista College changes regularly, however work obligations and childcare facilities do not. Therefore, parents are left in a difficult position where they are unable to attend language classes due to these factors.

This gap disproportionately affects **women**. Many refugee women arrive as primary caregivers of young children, and without childcare they are effectively barred from daytime courses or work training. Academic research confirms that improving childcare support is one of the most powerful levers to improve newcomer participation and prevent indirect gender discrimination. A 2024 study of Ukrainian refugees in the EU found that mothers who accessed childcare were **80% more likely to attend language/integration courses and 88% more likely to be**

employed or in training compared to those without childcare. They also achieved better language proficiency and social integration.

4.1 Research findings

- **Survey Findings**: 30% of respondents said they couldn't join programmes due to childcare problems.

Policy Gap: The current framework places an integration obligation on parents without ensuring the means to meet it. The Uitvoeringsprogramma mentions exploring solutions – *"investigate what is possible with regard to childcare for asylum status holders where this hinders fulfillment of integration obligations"* – but this remains in exploratory stages. In practice, many parents still struggle alone, risking non-compliance through no fault of their own.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 2 recommendations.

Make childcare support an integral part of integration facilitation by partnering with childcare providers and welfare organizations to create a guaranteed childcare program for refugees with young children [#12]. This could include reserving slots in local childcare centers for parents attending integration activities, subsidizing additional childcare costs beyond the allowance, or setting up on-site childcare at language class locations. Best practices can be drawn from Scandinavia, where local governments have provided free childcare to boost integration.

Ensure clear communication and case-management support to help newcomer parents navigate childcare registrations and allowance applications (currently no actor has this role) **[#13]**. By actively ensuring childcare access, Maastricht would remove a major structural barrier and fulfill its equality duties and prevent a situation where a neutral "*everyone must attend classes*"-rule disproportionately disadvantages women with children (a potential indirect discrimination on gender and ethnic grounds). In sum, childcare support should be treated as a *necessary integration service*, not an afterthought. This investment will pay off in higher course attendance and faster progress for newcomer families, ultimately benefiting the community and labour market at large.

5. Make Employment More Accessible

As outlined in Chapter 5, Action Line 3, the municipality plays a key role in guiding asylum status holders toward paid work, which significantly benefits wellbeing, socioeconomic status, and societal support. Despite this, their labour market participation remains low. Many highly motivated refugees want to work, but structural barriers stand in their way, including long waits

for permits, language thresholds, lack of recognition for foreign diplomas, and employer hesitance.

5.1 Research findings

- **Interview 5:** “I tried many sectors… I never even made it to interviews.”
- **Interview 4:** “Some employers ask for a driving license. I tried applying to various sectors - those were the major problems.”
- **Interview 16:** “I applied to clean, and even there they ask for B1 Dutch.”
- **Interview 17: “**I’m doing a good job - the children love me, and I’m bonding with them. It’s also where I get to practice my Dutch. I’ve been offered a paid position, but I cannot take it because I can’t get the TWV permit. I am very motivated to work, but when this permit is denied without clear reasons, people lose hope. We get demotivated.”
- **Key Findings:** Most of the status holders we spoke with were employed and had successfully found jobs. However, cultural adaptation remains a common challenge. Given the current extended waiting times during the asylum process (*Gemeente Maastricht, 2023*), it is essential to begin labour market integration earlier. Those who were able to access work opportunities while still in the process later reported stronger networks and smoother transitions into paid employment.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 5 recommendations.

Address the various barriers to employment faced by asylum seekers by creating a local network of “refugee-friendly” employers (e.g. in collaboration with CMM), **offering short-term, flexible, or entry-level roles with clear expectations and minimal administrative hurdles [#14].** Although asylum seekers fall under COA’s supervision, the Municipality should actively engage local employers in offering job opportunities to individuals still in the asylum procedure. This approach could indirectly strengthen the integration of future status holders by (1) encouraging local employers to become more open and accepting toward refugees as a whole, (2) building a network of legal work providers among asylum seekers, which could lead to long-term employment once they obtain their status, and (3) providing economic activity and motivation during the lengthy waiting periods that many currently face.

To overcome common bottlenecks such as lack of driver’s licenses and diploma recognition, we suggest **creating targeted support schemes, including subsidies, practical courses, or simplified processes, such as subsidized driving lessons, bridging or certification courses, and streamlined procedures for credential validation [#15].**

To provide support for lower-literate or lower-educated individuals by simplifying written information, the municipality should offer more visual or in-person guidance [#16], and ensure services are understandable without advanced language skills [#17].

Finally, the municipality should advocate nationally to reduce BSN and TWV processing times and explore local pilot solutions, such as facilitating TWV applications directly, in coordination with COA and relevant ministries [#18]. No one should be left waiting indefinitely when ready to contribute.

6. Make Education and Skills Count

Highly educated refugees often find themselves excluded from opportunities that match their skills. For example, a former university lecturer from Yemen (Interview 24) applied to over 2,000 jobs in the Netherlands, all rejected - often before his qualifications were even reviewed. Similarly, a multilingual woman from Iran (Interview 18), with a bachelor's degree, was placed in low-paid COA labour while being fully capable of more advanced work. This mismatch between qualifications and available pathways reflects what Bauder (2003) calls *institutional deskilling*, where migrants are structurally denied recognition of their skills and abilities. Anderson (2013) further shows how bureaucratic notions of "worthiness" replace actual capacity, turning experienced professionals into "unemployable others." To address this, a fast-track program for skilled newcomers - including credential recognition, Dutch-for-professionals, and job-matching support should be developed. This not only supports integration but also prevents long-term demotivation and economic waste.

As outlined in the *Beleidskader Nieuwe Stadsgezichten*, the **Social Vision 2040** identifies social security for all residents as one of the city's key pillars. Refugees range from PhD holders to people with limited formal education. Both groups need tailored support.

6.1 Research findings

- **Interview 23:** "I studied pharmacy, worked for ten years in management. In the Netherlands, I do nothing."
- **Interview 24:** "I have 26 years of experience. But nobody gives us the opportunity. You have to die here or stay blind."
- **Interview 7:** "I have a bachelor's degree in pharmacy. If you're Dutch, you can work at the pharmacy front desk without a degree, but I still can't, because I'm not licensed as a pharmacist in the Netherlands."
- **Interview 13:** "I have the education, but that's not the only thing that matters. I want to see myself in the work I do. I want to feel engaged. I want to work - I am a teacher. I was a school manager in my country for 12 years, and I've worked in education for 21 years."

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 2 recommendations.

For highly educated refugees, the Municipality of Maastricht should develop fast-track options that combine intensive Dutch courses with career orientation, and networking

opportunities in relevant sectors [#19]. To prevent structural de-skilling, the municipality should improve collaboration with local employers, recruitment and selection professionals, higher education institutions, and the Dutch credential evaluation service (IDW) to match newcomers to roles that better reflect their actual experience and qualifications. Career coaches or case workers should be trained to ask about prior education and skills early in the intake process.

Ideally, **the Municipality of Maastricht could bring this issue to the attention of national institutions such as NUFFIC [#20]**, as it requires action beyond the local level. One key example is the case of pharmacists, which is a protected profession in the Netherlands. This means that individuals with foreign qualifications and experience must seek formal permission to practice, creating significant barriers for refugees. A possible solution could be to allow refugees to take the same final examinations as Dutch-trained professionals, and if successful, have their diplomas recognized accordingly. This would offer a more direct and fair pathway to re-enter their profession.

7. Improve Communication and Information Access

Many refugees struggle to access clear and consistent information about their rights, obligations, and daily life in the Netherlands. Unanswered questions about work permits, BSNs, financial rules, and available support cause confusion and distrust.

7.1 Research findings

Interview 5: “I asked COA multiple times to register me for Dutch classes, but they never gave me an answer.”
Interview 8: “It’s a priority to know the rules… not just about work, all the laws here.”
Interview 16: “The letters come in Dutch. I don’t understand what they say. I just sign and hope it’s okay.”
Interview 20: “Nobody explained how to get a BSN. I got it through my own research.”
Interview 4: “I wish they would tell us what our rights are - someone from the Gemeente who knows.”

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 4 recommendations.

To reduce confusion and promote trust, the Municipality of Maastricht should work with COA to harmonize information provision, **ensuring that every newcomer receives basic, accurate orientation, such as a clear "Welcome to Maastricht" booklet, co-created with refugees and featuring visual guides to services, housing, work rights, and financial rules [#21].**

A multilingual WhatsApp channel or similar tool should be launched to provide weekly verified updates and a space for common questions [#22]. Given the digital gap, especially

among low-educated or older individuals, **digital literacy courses and support should be offered early in the integration process [#23]. Access to devices (e.g. shared laptops or tablets) and multilingual digital helpdesks is essential to reduce exclusion [#24]**. Clear, consistent, and timely information empowers people to take charge of their integration; confusion, by contrast, only delays progress.

8. Address Unrealistic Participation Requirements in the Z-route

The **Z-route**, intended for low-educated refugees, requires 800 hours of participation over three years, but Maastricht's implementation plan notes a critical lack of suitable placements to meet this target. With 88 expected Z-route participants, the city would need to create 580 hours of activity placements weekly - an unrealistic demand given current capacity. This disproportionally affects vulnerable individuals and risks indirect discrimination if municipalities fail to support them adequately. As stated in *Chapter 5 – Action Line 3* of the *Uitvoeringsprogramma taal en participatie in de Wet inburgering 2021* (*Gemeente Maastricht, 2024*), integration consultants currently lack the capacity to match each participant with opportunities, raising concerns about fairness and equal treatment.

8.1 Research findings

- **Interview 21**: "I want to volunteer, but they say they don't have space for me."
- ***Uitvoeringsprogramma*:** Even city staff admit there are **not enough roles** to meet Z-route hour demands.

8.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 7 recommendations.

Rebalance the Z-route participation requirement with a more realistic and support-oriented approach. Practically, this means two things: *(a)* **Increase the supply of suitable participation opportunities**, and *(b)* **apply the 800-hour target more flexibly based on individual situations**.

For (a), the municipality should actively **expand partnerships with local organizations, social enterprises, and municipal departments to create roles for Z-route participants [#25]** . The implementation programme already suggests expanding the network and even looking internally for placements. This must ideally be accelerated. Consider **dedicating a coordinator (as planned with the "participation places consultant") to broker opportunities [#26]**, and **incentivize local businesses, sports clubs, education institutions and NGO's (through subsidies or recognition) to host more volunteers/trainees from the Z-route [#27]**. Also, **develop** group-based activities (like the planned activation program with Maastricht Sport and Kaleidoscope) on a larger scale – e.g., **group volunteering projects or workshops that count towards hours [#28]**. The city could organize, for instance, a weekly community clean-up or

urban gardening programme specifically for integration participants, ensuring both meaningful contribution and language practice. In addition, the municipality could consider **adding a dedicated section for refugees on the Maastricht Doet volunteering platform [#29]**. Finally, **incentivize volunteering organizations that receive municipal funding through the *Subsidie Vrijwillige Inzet* to include refugee volunteers in their activities as part of their funding [#30].**

For (b), it's important to remember the law's intent: **integration participation should be personalized**. Use the leeway in the law to individualize plans – for example those with health issues or caretaking duties should have adjusted requirements for the number of hours (the law allows some flexibility under "customization" and no fixed end language level). Moreover, if someone is diligently trying but the *municipality fails to provide enough hours*, that should not result in punishment. Maastricht can set an example by **implementing a "no penalties without opportunities" principle: integration coaches will document if a lack of placement is on the system, not the person, and advocate to waive or extend requirements in such cases [#31].** In summary, we should shift the narrative from blaming the participant to sharing responsibility. By ramping up available activities and adjusting expectations to realistic levels, the Z-route can become a "rich path" rather than a pressure cooker. This prevents indirectly discriminating against those who, with more help, *can* integrate at their own best pace.

9. Support Digital Inclusion of Newcomers

The integration process in the Netherlands is increasingly digital by default – from using DigiD for government services to online language learning portals and digital administration of participation hours. However, **many newcomers lack sufficient digital skills**, making this a silent barrier. The *Nieuwe Stadsgezichten* policy document explicitly states: *"For many status holders, the lack of sufficient digital skills is an obstacle. Think of logging in with a DigiD, finding your way on various government websites (e.g. DUO and benefits), digital banking, and the use of Microsoft Office in a working environment*." In other words, tasks that citizens and integrators are expected to do independently - register for exams, apply for allowances, communicate with the Municipality of Maastricht - can be daunting or impossible without digital literacy. If integration information and opportunities are primarily communicated online, digitally illiterate newcomers may not even be aware of them or be able to access them, leading to **digital exclusion**. This issue often correlates with education level and age: older refugees or those from rural backgrounds with limited schooling have had little exposure to computers and the internet. It can also affect women disproportionately if, in their culture, men have more access to technology than women. Currently, digital skills training is only a **minor part of formal integration courses and social guidance**. Maastricht's plan notes that while VISTA's learning routes and the VluchtelingenWerk coaches touch on digital skills, it is limited, and "a non-formal and informal supplementary offer is desirable". In practice, many newcomers rely on ad-hoc help from volunteers or younger family members to get through online procedures. We risk a scenario where those who cannot bank online, fill forms digitally, or use email are left behind in

integration progress – a clear equity issue as daily life and civic participation move online. For newcomers, digital exclusion can mean failing to obtain benefits they are entitled to, missing class updates, or inability to complete e-learning components of integration. A policy that assumes everyone can navigate digital systems thus indirectly discriminates against these groups.

9.1 Research findings

- **Interview 3:** “They tell me to log in, but I don’t know how. I need help even to open the page.”
- **Survey Findings:** 70% of respondents rated their digital skills as “poor” or “none.” Some said they had missed appointments due to digital confusion.

9.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose 4 recommendations.

Launch a “Digital Inclusion for Newcomers” initiative as a core part of Maastricht’s integration support. This should include dedicated digital skills training workshops for all integrators (especially those in the Z-route or with low education) [#32]. For example, a short module on using DigiD, government websites, and basic computer skills could be offered early in the integration program, in multiple languages. The municipality could partner with libraries, local NGOs, or organizations like Digisterker (which already runs digital skill programs for refugees) to provide these trainings and open computer lab hours for practice.

Additionally, **equip the integration office and language classrooms with a few computers or tablets and on-site assistance, so that even those without personal devices can practice and complete required online tasks [#33].** Ensuring **multilingual digital helpdesks or buddy systems (pairing a tech-savvy volunteer with a newcomer)** can also bridge the gap **[#34]**. Share responsibility by **communicating any critical integration information (invitations, notifications, assignments) in a simplified and accessible way, and - if sent digitally, actively verify that the person knows how to access it, or provide paper copies/phone calls as backup [#35]**.

By proactively addressing digital literacy, the City will prevent the indirect exclusion of newcomers from an increasingly e-governance-driven society. This move also aligns with broader smart city and inclusion goals, ensuring *all* residents can participate in civic life and access services. In effect, digital empowerment of refugees is an investment in their self-reliance, turning what is currently a barrier into a tool for integration.

Table 1. Key Integration Barriers, Gaps, and Recommended Actions

The table below summarizes the key integration challenges identified through the research, alongside the corresponding policy gaps and proposed recommendations.

Policy Requirement	Current Support & Gaps	Recommendations
Early access to Dutch language classes	Many asylum seekers are motivated but face long waits, mismatched course levels, and rely on volunteer-led classes or self-study. Dropout rates are high in pre-integration courses.	Begin Dutch classes from day one, regardless of legal status. Offer informal learning alongside formal tracks. Create an updated online overview of all classes. Collaborate with local institutions to expand options.
Flexible course schedules	Most classes are during the day, conflicting with work or caregiving. This limits access, especially for single parents or those already employed.	Pilot evening and weekend classes. Allow flexible attendance during work periods with blended support. Make integration compatible with employment and family life.
Gender-inclusive integration	Women face unique barriers due to their dependent status, caregiving roles, and limited mobility. Current programs for women are planned but not operational.	Launch women-only intro groups and empowerment trainings. Assign female counselors. Actively involve spouses in support plans. Draw on Scandinavian models.

Childcare access for integration	Lack of structural childcare prevents many parents (especially mothers) from joining required courses or work activities. Current solutions are exploratory.	Make childcare part of the integration system. Reserve daycare spots, subsidize costs, and offer childcare at course sites. Provide case management help for registration.
Employment for those in the procedure	Asylum seekers face long permit delays, high language thresholds, a lack of diploma recognition, and employer hesitation.	Build a network of refugee-friendly employers. Offer entry-level work with minimal admin barriers. Subsidize key costs like licensing and advocate nationally to streamline work permits.
Recognition of foreign qualifications	Skilled refugees are often placed far below their level. Credentials go unrecognized; many face demotivation.	Fast-track skilled newcomers. Combine intensive Dutch with career coaching and partnerships with IDW, universities, and employers. Engage NUFFIC on national solutions.
Access to clear information	Refugees report confusion, delays, and inconsistent communication from COA and the municipality. Many struggle to understand Dutch letters.	Co-create a multilingual welcome booklet. Launch a WhatsApp channel for verified updates. Offer orientation early and consistently across AZCs.
Realistic Z-route participation	The 800-hour requirement is unrealistic under current placement capacity. Vulnerable participants risk failing through no fault of their own.	Expand participation opportunities and individualize hour targets. Partner with funded NGOs and incentivize Z-route inclusion. Track placement shortages and prevent penalties.

Digital literacy for integration	Digital systems are the default, but many newcomers lack ICT skills. Limited training and access mean many miss critical updates and tasks.	Create a “Digital Inclusion for Newcomers” program. Offer training in DigiD, government sites, and job tools. Equip learning centers with devices and assistance.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Refugee Project Maastricht has been collaborating with the Municipality of Maastricht to provide recommendations on how to further improve support for refugees, asylum seekers, and naturalized residents in the city. To do this meaningfully, we want to hear directly from you, the people most affected by these policies.

While many of the questions below focus on topics such as work and learning Dutch, we welcome all ideas and input. At the end of the questionnaire, you'll also have the chance to share any additional suggestions on other topics that matter to you.

Thank you for taking part in this interview. Your insights will help shape future policies and improve the way the municipality supports people in the integration process.
All responses will be anonymized, and no personal data will be collected or used outside of this research. Interviews will be conducted in person or via Google Forms, depending on what is most convenient for you.

There are no right or wrong answers - we are simply interested in your honest opinions and experiences. Please feel free to skip any questions or not share anything you're uncomfortable with.

Some basic information about yourself

1. What is your age?
   - ☐ 18-25
   - ☐ 26-40
   - ☐ 41-62
   - ☐ 62+

2. What is your gender?
   - ☐ female
   - ☐ male
   - ☐ other
   - ☐ prefer not to say

3. Do you have children? If yes, how many and what is their age?

4. What is your present status
- ☐ still in the asylum process
- ☐ status holder
- ☐ (almost) done with naturalization
- ☐ Other:.....

5. What is your living situation?
- ☐ I live in the AZC
- ☐ I live independently
- ☐ In a crisis shelter
- ☐ In a COA Building
- ☐ Other: .....

6. What is your education level
- ☐ Primary school
- ☐ Secondary school
- ☐ Vocational education
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree

Working in Maastricht

7. Where do/did your work? (multiple options possible)

- ☐ I never had a job in Maastricht
- ☐ horeca (hotel, bar, restaurant)
- ☐ shop
- ☐ manufacturing
- ☐ facility services
- ☐ construction
- ☐ services (ICT, hairdresser, beauty salon)
- ☐ other:.....

8. Did COA, the municipality, or other institutions give you clear information about your work rights?

- ☐ More than enough
- ☐ Enough
- ☐ Virtually nothing
- ☐ Never

9. How did you receive the information about your rights?

- ☐ I had a meeting with the municipality
- ☐ I had a meeting with COA
- ☐ I received a brochure
- ☐ I didn't get such information

10. Have you ever had a job where you felt really comfortable and supported? What made it feel that way?

11. Do you think that your status as a refugee impacts the employers' decision to hire you or not?

- If yes, why?
- Can you give examples?
- Have you ever wanted to explain something to an employer?
- Do you feel that your employers understand your needs or situation?

12. Can you describe how you would like to be supported with questions or problems at work?

13. Can you share a good or bad experience you had with an employer here? **DO NOT** give details about yourself or the employer. We just want to know how you could be better supported. Describe the situation itself.

14. Have you ever felt that you needed more information or support in a situation at work? If so, can you describe what kind of information or support you would have wanted? **DO NOT** give details about yourself or the employer. We just want to know how you could be better supported

15. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: *"I feel sufficiently prepared and supported to defend my rights as an employee."*

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Language Learning & Pre-integration

16. What's your level of Dutch?

- ☐ Beginner: I can understand and say a few basic words or sentences, but I cannot follow full conversations yet.
- ☐ Intermediate: I can understand and take part in simple conversations about everyday topics, but I still make mistakes or need help.
- ☐ Advanced: I can follow and actively participate in most conversations, including at work or school, with little difficulty.
- ☐ Fluent: I speak Dutch almost like a native speaker and can easily express myself in any situation.

17. How did you start learning Dutch? (open question)

18. If you took some lessons, where did you take them?

- ☐ Vista college
- ☐ RPM
- ☐ University of Maastricht
- ☐ Other (where):

19. Was there a long wait before you could start Dutch classes?

- ☐ up to one month
- ☐ one to six months
- ☐ up to a year
- ☐ more than a year

20. Did you feel like you forgot things or lost motivation during that wait?
    - Did it make you feel less confident in speaking Dutch?

21. Did you try learn Dutch in alternative ways? If yes, how?
- ☐ With the support of NGOs (please indicate which ones)
- ☐ With the help of friends
- ☐ At work
- ☐ self learning (apps like Duolingo, watching YouTube, and movies, etc)

22. What kind of Dutch practice would help you the most?

- ☐ More conversations
- ☐ grammar lessons

- ☐ workplace Dutch
- ☐ language buddy
- ☐ other: ...

23. Do you feel safe or comfortable speaking Dutch in public or at work? Why or why not?

Feedback & Transparency

24. Would you like to have more opportunities to share your opinion on integration policies?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don’t know

25. Do you think that during your integration process, which has been supervised by COA or Gemeente, your wishes and suggestions have been taken into account?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don’t know
- ☐ Other..

26. Would it help if you could read reports or updates about how the Integration program of Gemeente Maastricht is going?

27. Is there anything else you want to share with us about your experience in Maastricht?

Appendix 2

List of 35 recommendations

1) Provide Dutch classes early in the process

1. Start Dutch language learning from day one.
2. Informal options should be expanded, including adding additional conversation groups, volunteer-led sessions, and language cafés.
3. Offer different learning tracks, including fast-pased tracks, foundational ones, flexible and hybrid ones.
4. Create a central online overview of all available Dutch classes in Maastricht and update it regularly.
5. Expand access by offering classes, facilities, and encouraging native Dutch speakers to contribute through community-based teaching.

2) More flexible scheduling of language courses

6. Expand flexible learning schedules for integration courses: evening class offerings, weekend sessions, and possibly online/hybrid learning options.
7. Implement blended learning schedules that are work-compatible: e.g. temporarily reduce class hours when starting a job, and provide complementary *self-study resources or tutoring.*

3) Address gendered dependency questions and increase women-focused support

8. Develop a female-focused integration support track to empower refugee and migrant women, e.g. “Introduction to Maastricht for Women” programme.
9. Offer an empowerment training series, covering topics like Dutch women’s rights (important for those from countries with high gender inequality), finding work as a woman in the Netherlands, and balancing family and integration.
10. Spousal awareness is key: involve the husbands/partners by making it clear that the integration of their wives is equally important and expected
11. Draw inspiration from Scandinavian integration programmes that explicitly target gender gaps.

4) Enhance childcare as a gatekeeper to integration

12. Make childcare support an integral part of integration facilitation by partnering with childcare providers and welfare organizations to create a guaranteed childcare program for refugees with young children.
13. Ensure clear communication and case-management support to help newcomer parents navigate childcare registrations and allowance applications.

5) Make employment more accessible

14. Address the various barriers to employment faced by asylum seekers by creating a local network of “refugee-friendly” employers, offering short-term, flexible, or entry-level roles with clear expectations and minimal administrative hurdles.
15. We suggest targeted support schemes, including subsidies, practical courses, or simplified processes such as subsidized driving lessons, bridging or certification courses, and streamlined procedures for credential validation (e.g. provisional recognition).
16. Provide support for lower-literate or lower-educated individuals by simplifying written information, offering more visual or in-person guidance.
17. Ensure services are understandable without advanced language skills.
18. Advocate nationally to reduce BSN and TWV processing times and explore local pilot solutions, such as facilitating TWV applications directly, in coordination with COA and relevant ministries.

6) Make education and skills count

19. Develop fast-track options for highly educated refugees that combine intensive Dutch courses with career orientation and networking opportunities in relevant sectors.
20. Bring this issue to the attention of national institutions such as NUFFIC in order to create a more direct and fair pathway to re-enter their profession.

7) Improve communication and information access

21. Ensure that every newcomer receives basic, accurate orientation, e.g. a "Welcome to Maastricht" booklet, co-created with refugees and featuring visual guides to services, housing, work rights, and financial rules.
22. Create a multilingual WhatsApp channel or similar tool to provide weekly verified updates and a space for common questions.
23. Given the digital gap, especially among low-educated or older individuals, digital literacy courses and support should be offered early in the integration process.
24. Access to devices (e.g. shared laptops or tablets) and multilingual digital helpdesks is essential to reduce exclusion.

8) Address unrealistic participation requirements in the Z-route

25. Expand partnerships with local organizations, social enterprises, and municipal departments to create roles for Z-route participants.
26. Dedicate a coordinator (as planned with the “participation places consultant”) to broker opportunities.
27. Incentivize local businesses, sports clubs, education institutions and NGO’s (through subsidies or recognition) to host more volunteers/trainees from the Z-route.
28. Develop group volunteering projects or workshops that count towards hours.
29. Add a dedicated section for refugees on the Maastricht Doet volunteering platform.

30. Incentivize volunteering organizations that receive municipal funding through the *Subsidie Vrijwillige Inzet* to include refugee volunteers in their activities as part of their funding.
31. Implement a “no penalties without opportunities” principle: integration coaches will document if a lack of placement is on the system, not the person, and advocate to waive or extend requirements in such cases.

9) Support the digital inclusion of newcomers

32. Launch a “Digital Inclusion for Newcomers” initiative as a core part of Maastricht’s integration support. This should include dedicated digital skills training workshops for all integrators (especially those in the Z-route or with low education).
33. Equip the integration office and language classrooms with a few computers or tablets and on-site assistance, so that even those without personal devices can practice and complete required online tasks.
34. Ensure multilingual digital helpdesks or buddy systems (pairing a tech-savvy volunteer with a newcomer) to help bridge the gap.
35. Share responsibility by communicating any critical integration information (invitations, notifications, assignments) in a simplified and accessible way, and - if sent digitally, actively verify that the person knows how to access it, or provide paper copies/phone calls as backup.